

Nigerians Are to Blame for Their Own Trafficking to Italy

Human trafficking occurs all over the world. It effects people of all kinds, no matter the country, gender, age, race or religion. Webster dictionary defines the heinous act as “organized criminal activity in which human beings are treated as possessions to be controlled and exploited as by being forced into prostitution or involuntary labor” (Human Trafficking). When a person is trafficked, the process is usually involuntary, and with violence. The act of slavery can be used for human labor, sex, or every day work. This crime can happen anywhere, at any time of day and can be done very discreetly anywhere in our society.

Human trafficking has been around for centuries, and the problem has yet to be solved. As our society develops, it creates more ways for the human trafficking industry to find people, transport them, and hide them from authorities. Today, “an estimated 24.9 million victims are trapped in modern-day slavery” (Human Trafficking by the Numbers). Apart from human trafficking as a whole, “there are approximately 800,000 people trafficked across international borders annually and, of these, 80% are women or girls.” (Deshpande & Nour 2013). Regarding border crossing, Nigerians have been trafficked to Italy by both other Nigerians and Italians for many years. Once there, they are forced into being sex slaves, drug dealers, and many types of human labor. The question becomes, because Nigerians have gone to Italy willingly in the past for sex work, and Nigerians themselves are trafficking younger Nigerians into joining their work, is Italy capable of controlling this illegal activity being done in their country. Ultimately, with the history of crime in Italy, and the billion-dollar industry human trafficking has become, there is only so much a government can do to control crimes of this level.

Nigerians have been migrating to European countries for many years in search of jobs and a better life for themselves and their families. Nigerian nationals are spread all over Europe

in cities like London, Germany, Belgium, Austria, and Italy. Italy was a common destination as they had a high demand for low skilled labor services. In the 1980's Nigerian men and women migrated on their own to Castel Volturno, a poor area outside of Naples. Men worked in the tomato fields and many women chose sex work as their source of income for the high revenue. The new migrants "were not welcome to integrate with the Italians and instead set up a peripheral society where they lived outside of the law" (Nadeau 2018). However, even though they didn't integrate, the Nigerian Drug smuggling gangs paid Italian Mafia to live on their territory. As more and more Nigerians began to move to Europe, settling in these cities became more difficult and expensive. With this occurring, sex workers, including the Nigerians already in Italy used this flaw as a way to enhance their business and promise people a 'better life.' The Nigerian prostitutes became Madams to help create revenue for the Nigerian gangs. They began trafficking young Nigerian women to Italy to join them and control their lives as sex workers. The drug trafficking gangs had so many Nigerians migrating that they started to spread to Northern Italy and throughout the country. Rather than using force and violence, these traffickers have been using deceiving ways to attract young Nigerian women into migrating to this new country. According to the International Organization for Migration "more than 80% of women brought to Europe from Nigeria are unknowingly "sponsored" by sex traffickers who have paid for their journey" (Nadeau 2018).

The victims of the crimes are initially invited to Italy by close family members or friends. They're told about this life they could have, as a reward for their incredible school work, or possible job opportunities in Italy. They're then put in touch with a Nigerian woman in Italy, a 'Madam' who will help them plan their travels and take care of them in their new home. The Madam initially pays for the journey over but makes a pact with the young girls that they will

repay her. This promise is made in a religious manner with “an Ohen, a priest of the indigenous religious traditions” (Carling 2017). This pact causes difficulties for the young women when they later find out they were lied to and don’t want to break the promise they made with their faith. Once everything is in order, these women are put on busses, trains, and planes to make their way to Italy. Once they arrive, they realize everything they were told was a lie. Most Nigerian girls trafficked to Italy are told they owe their Madam around 60,000 euros and must start work immediately to pay off their debt. “A cut goes to the recruiter in Nigeria, a cut to the traffickers and smugglers who expedited the women’s journey, and a large portion goes to the Nigerian gang members, who much pay the [Italian]” (Nadeau 2018).

A victim of this crime, Blessing Okoedion was fortunate enough to fight for herself, and get away from the horrible situation she was put in. Blessing was initially told about a computer technician job available in Italy by Alice, a woman at her Church. Alice helped her arrange everything and then connected Blessing to a Nigerian in Italy, Madam Faith. Madam Faith continued to help with her process and made a deal regarding her payment for the journey. Okoedion explained once she arrived in Italy, her Madam clarified a list of rules, and told Blessing she had to begin working immediately to start paying off her debt. The rules included, defining who the undercover cops were, how much to charge, where to hide her money, how much she had to pay for her living expenses, and how to act around clients and other workers. Blessing had to pay for space on the side walk, her phone bill, rent, and food. She quickly realized “she was just merchandise, a machine for sex, a piece of meat” (Nadeau 2018). After her first day of ‘selling herself,’ the money she made was immediately taken by her Madam. In order to get herself out of this living nightmare, Blessing found the local police station and made sure not to interact with anybody that could be a part of the business she was brought into. The police

then took her to Casa Ruth, a “home run by Catholic nuns for migrant women forced into sexual slavery” (Nadeau 2018). There, Blessing met an Italian journalist, Anna Pozzi and the two published an autobiography of Blessing’s journey. Since, then Blessing has been a spokesperson, and made it her job to help those stuck in her same situation, and prevent others from being trafficked in. Although she has tried, Blessing has not been able to turn in neither Madam Faith or Alice for their illegal actions. In many cases, the women who are bound to their sex work, for personal or religious reasons spend around five years paying off their debt. After they’re done, “women are free to go, but some end up becoming madams themselves, either convinced there are lucrative profits to be made, or as an act of revenge” (Nadeau 2018). Apart from the women that make it through, hundreds are raped and killed for disobeying their Madams and left on the street or plastic bins.

As this is a prominent problem in the world, and Italy itself, Italians are aware of what is going on and there are many groups of people trying to help these vulnerable Nigerians. Casa Ruth, the house run by nuns for women forced into sexual slavery is just one organization that has the want and resources to help these women. An NPR article explains the work of a nongovernmental group of social workers, Associazione Penelope who approach women they see and try to offer help. The article described a group of Nigerians they saw on the street waiting for a car to show up. The social worker spoke to the young women and gave them advice about available lawyers and doctors. The women declined the offer and said they just needed documents and work, something to give them an income. Apart from nongovernmental organizations there are people from the International Organization of Migration who wait at the Italian borders and try to prevent women from what they could join. These IOM workers “listen for ‘indicators’ that might suggest a woman has been trafficked” (Mahr 2018). As they are able

to help some, the migrants come in large numbers, which make it difficult to approach and interview everyone. However, as many people want to help these victims, they often don't know how to. In a Guardian article a woman described her first interaction with Joy, an eighteen-year-old sex worker who was waiting for a car to pick her up in Cara di Mineo. She thought she was going to be taken to a hair salon. Joy came to Italy for a job as a hairdresser and like many other young women, was forced into prostitution. The women began talking to Joy, listened to some of her story, gave her number, and wished her luck. After she left, the woman regretted not being more of an aid to Joy, as she had an idea of what she was going to endure. Although, she was concerned about her own safety had she involved herself in Joy's situation. About a year later, after Joy became free from her slavery she contacted the women. Joy asked the women why she didn't tell her what was going to happen and couldn't believe how naïve she was to her own situation.

As social workers, and different organizations try to help these women forced into sex slaves, professionals like doctors aren't turning a blind eye to the information they receive either. In 2012 doctors in Cara di Mineo requested an investigation on the area as they performed an excessive amount of abortions that year. An article in The Guardian explained, "the center's doctors performed 32 abortions on migrants, an increase of more than 200% on the year before" (Nadeau 2018). The investigation concluded the increase in abortions was from an increase in prostitution and tried to supply condoms to those affected. Overall people want to help, however, they don't know how to, or to what extent they can. Apart from that, often times the victims are initially naïve to their situation, or don't want the help offered to them.

In this situation the Italian police and government perspective is similar to those of citizens trying to help, however, they do have some power over the illegal actions going on in

their country. Initially the government tries to prevent human trafficking from happening. They have “launched nationwide public awareness anti-trafficking campaign, including a video broadcast on national television publicizing the trafficking hotline” (Italy). Apart from that, they mandate diplomats, troops, and other government workers to receive anti-trafficking training. In an effort to prevent problems at the border, the Italian government made an agreement with the Libyan Coast Guard to reduce the number of irregular migrants to cross the central Mediterranean. Going along with this idea, the government created a training program “for 360 law enforcement officials from 22 African countries on immigration and border control, based in Egypt, including training on combating trafficking” (Italy).

Considering they can’t prevent human trafficking and the horrific futures it creates, the government tries to protect those already there. In recent years, the government has increased the amount of investigations they’ve opened. “In 2017, the government investigated 412 persons under the penal code section for slavery, related to but outside of the definition of the trafficking law, with 108 convictions, compared to 43 convictions in 2016” (Italy). Most times convicted traffickers are sent to prison for seven to nine years. One aspect of the Nigerian gangs that make it difficult for police is their relationship with the Italian Mafia and how they come along on their own territories. The Italian Mafia has made it easier for Nigerian drug trafficking gangs to establish their presence. Although, because they’ve been around for so long the Italian government has the anti-mafia law, which “makes just associating with a criminal organization a crime” (Mahr 2018). The police have opened investigations on certain areas, and specific gangs with high levels of criminal activity. One specific investigation done by the anti-mafia police was to get women out of the Carra di Mineo facility. The police arrested Madams and eventually found some of their victims, one being eighteen-year-old Joy. The police convinced Joy to “help

them catch the people who had trafficked her” and from there the police were able to succeed in their investigation and shut down the facility (Nadeau 2018).

Apart from the investigations, the Italian government has been funding more and more NGO's as human trafficking has become a bigger problem. Although they miss the opportunity to talk to a lot of victims, The Department of Equal Opportunity reported “NGOs assisted 1,354 potential victims in 2017, a significant increase from 851 victims assisted in 2016” (Italy). Of that total, approximately 71% of those potential victims were Nigerian. As they can't stop new human trafficking, the NGO's find victims already in the country and offer them shelter and services. Once these victims get in contact with the NGO's there is a possibility that the government will grant temporary residency and work permits to help them get out of their situation. “The government granted 418 residence permits to victims in 2017, compared to 340 permits in 2016” (Italy). Children affected receive counseling services, enrollment in public schools and residence permits until they're 18. The Italian government has been investing more and more of their time and money into the human trafficking industry around their country. In 2017 alone, the government gave 22.5 million euros to NGO's, which is almost triple of what they gave in 2015.

Human trafficking is a worldwide issue and has been occurring all throughout civilization. As all types of human trafficking are repulsive, sex trafficking exceeds most other forms of slavery. This crime is happening to young children and women of all ages, all over the world. Nigerians specifically are just one of the many groups trafficked to Italy, and many other countries in Europe. Human trafficking being a billion-dollar industry, with more crime than most can fathom makes it very difficult to control. The process starts with a simple lie that turns to hopes and dreams, a continued lie that takes people away from their family and life. They

arrive in a new country that they believe will set them up for their future only to learn the truth. They are then traumatized and lose all hope for themselves. All of this happens while someone else is receiving millions of dollars and killing those they don't benefit from. The Italian government has put a lot of effort into fixing the crimes happening within their territory, but there is only so much they can do. A unique factor of Nigerians being human trafficked to Italy by other Nigerians makes it almost impossible for the Italian government to take control. Apart from that, Human traffickers interlace a religious promise into their victims, which ultimately creates deeper personal issues. The Italian government is trying to work with horrific lies, naïve people dying for a better future and some of the most dangerous people in the world. Ultimately, the Italian government has increased their time and money into getting control of this horrific industry, but their efforts can only go so far with a crime this advanced.

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